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# Training Preparation and the Professional Development of Principals in Henan Province, China: Formal and Informal Learning

## Abstract

Principal preparation and training is generally viewed as an important contributor to school and system improvement. While the international evidence base on leadership and leadership development is extensive, contemporary accounts of principal preparation in a number of Asian countries are not widespread. This article outlines the findings from a small-scale, exploratory investigation of principal preparation and training in one province in China, focusing on the principals' learning preferences. Open ended questionnaire and interview data were collected from a sample of secondary school principals in Henan Province in China, as part of a larger comparative study. The findings show that while principals in this province appreciate their formal training they also seek out other sources of informal preparation to assist them in their fulfilling their many obligations and responsibilities. The data also highlights that many principals in China found that the demands of their formal leadership role are very challenging, particularly in delivering contemporary reforms such as the new curriculum. The article concludes by proposing that for principals in China, there are some contradictions and tensions associated with the current demands of this leadership role.

**Keywords:** leadership preparation; principal training; secondary schools; school improvement; principal effectiveness

## Introduction

Throughout the world, researchers have acknowledged that the leadership of the principal makes a difference to student learning, school development, and educational change (Bush, 2011; Hallinger, 2011; Lee et al., 2012; Sun & Yang, 2014; Walker & Qian, 2015; Xing, 2013). Empirical evidence shows that school leaders play a pivotal role in securing school improvement and school effectiveness, and are a crucial factor in determining a school's success (Asia Society, 2012; Harris et al., 2014; Mendels, 2012; Pritchett & Riley, 2013). Yang (2014) highlights that focusing on the principal's selection, training and professional development is a critical factor in securing positive educational reform and transformation.

Ever since the 1990s, the principal training has received increased policy attention, largely because it has been argued that school principals are "best placed to implement a range of education reform agendas and to drive fundamental changes in governance, curriculum and management" (Yan & Ehrich, 2009: p. 2). Currently in China, school principal training is still considered to be an important strategy for improving educational quality and keeping pace with the demands of a rapidly changing world (Chao, 2016; Rao, 2015). Contemporary principal training in China is aimed at

improving educational quality and is a central component in achieving quality-oriented educational success (Lu, Chen & Zheng, 2010). It has been posited that the overall quality of school principals in the country varies considerably and that those leading schools simply cannot meet the contemporary demands of educational development and transformational needs (Qian & Walker, 2014; Zheng, et al., 2013). For example, certain writers have advocated that school principals in China are ill-prepared to steer school-wide transformation and lack the skills of strategic planning, curriculum, instruction, teacher development, performance review and other important elements of school management (Chen & Xu, 2010; Chu & Fu, 2011; Chu & Cravens, 2012). Other writers proposed that even though China has the largest education system, the quality of school leadership practice is far behind other countries (Chu & Cravens 2012; Wing-Wah, 2013).

The evidential foundation on contemporary approaches to educational leadership in China still remains relatively limited. As Qian and Walker (2014: p. 62) noted that “there have been few investigations of the role of Chinese principals”. They also add that “as China is at the intersection of traditional and imported ideas”, it is not surprising that many educational leadership theories have been mainly borrowed from the West (Qian & Walker, 2014, p. 62). In summary, there is a relative lack of contemporary, empirical evidence about educational leadership in mainland China (Walker, et al., 2012; Walker & Qian, 2015). A review of the literature by Hallinger and Bryant (2013), found that there were less than 20 articles written in English concerning educational leadership in China. Similarly, Walker et al., (2012) reviewed 170 English and Chinese publications about principal leadership in Mainland China between 1998 and 2008, and found only 14 were in English. More recently, Walker & Qian, (2015) identified 39 journal articles and 17 book chapters published in English over a fifteen year period.

The release of the 2009 and 2012 PISA results created a global interest in educational practices in Shanghai in particular, and China more generally. There is now widespread international interest in learning from the ‘best’, despite they acknowledge limitations of policy borrowing and as such, far greater attention is placed on how school leaders are being prepared and trained (Harris & Jones, 2015). This article explores the nature of principal preparation and training in one province in China and in so doing does not attempt to generalize to the entire country but rather aims to illuminate the contemporary nature and enactment of the school leadership role. This article provides empirical evidence about secondary school principals in Henan Province and explores their views about leadership preparation and development, especially in terms of formal and informal learning. The article begins by outlining the development of school leaders in China followed by an account of the research methodology framing the empirical findings. The article concludes by discussing the central themes emerging from the data and by arguing that principals in this province experience certain tensions and contradictions in their current role.

## The Development of School Leaders in China

China is the largest education system in the world, consisting of total 299,302 primary and secondary schools (China Statistical Yearbook, 2015). Therefore, the initial preparation of school principals and the professional development of school leaders is both a significant challenge and of great importance. According to Rao (2015), leadership preparation and professional development in China have been the focus of increased attention for two main reasons: first, the school principal is perceived as the person who can promote school efficiency; secondly, in order to keep pace with complex and dynamic social and economic changes, it is understood that school principals require preparation and professional development to equip them for this leadership role. Furthermore, China is pursuing quality education (*su zhi jiao yu*) and seeking ways to promote innovative education and in this respect, school principals are viewed as catalysts of educational reform and change (Chen, 2010; Qian & Walker, 2015; Walker & Qian, 2015).

Modern China started with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and during the 1950's and 60's, school principal training first emerged with the prime purpose of producing better leadership in Chinese schools (Xu 2011; Sun & Yang, 2014; Zhang, 2014). In the early days of the PRC (1949-1956), the Chinese educational system followed the Soviet Union's educational pattern (Zhang & Chen, 2014) with the simple but potent idea that schools were '*institutions of socialization*' (Hao, 2012). The key aim, at that time, was to recover and develop a new educational system with school leaders and teachers as key contributors to the rebuilding of the national economy (Stewart, 2012; Tang et al., 2014).

In 1954, the Chinese central government issued '*Instructions about Improvement and Development of Middle School Education*'. This document stipulated the first formal training programme conducted by the Ministry of Education. According to Walker et al. (2012), political ideology was an integral part of school principals' job description, as it is in their preparation and training programmes. This one-year training programme consisted of philosophy, pedagogy and psychology and was mainly dominated by political ideology.

Between 1957 and 1976 political and social disruption brought major shifts and changes in China. Schools were closed down, teachers worked as labourers in factories, and any form of educator raised suspicion (Stewart, 2012; Giles et al., 2015). This was the period of *Mao's Cultural Revolution* (1966-1976), where schools experienced a period of turbulence and upheaval, research institutions were revoked and all school principal training was discontinued (Sui, 2012; Giles et al., 2015). Following this Revolution was the period of the '*great leap forward*' as the People's Republic of China salvaged and restored the education system from the ruins. The weakened foundation of the school system, transformed the views of the State Government regarding the professionalism of

school leaders, where the role of principals was viewed as the way forward to recover and re-establish quality within the educational system (Xu, 2011).

In 1980, the re-establishment of the Central Academy of Education Administration in Beijing marked the revival of principal preparation and training in China (Chu & Cravens, 2012). Training programmes were based on the standards and guidelines specific to principalship, which aligned with the national consensus of '*Four Modernizations*' (Pan, 2011). These training programmes were administered to educational leaders under a top-down, centrally administered mandate (Tang et al., 2014; Zhang & Chen, 2014). A strong hierarchical approach by the State government was deployed to disseminate what was expected of training providers to deliver to more than a million school principals, who participated in various development training programmes (Zheng et al., 2013). It has been argued that this centralized control of principal development, was politically instigated (Giles et al., 2015) and that the form of followership that was produced did not imply that school leaders were inadequately prepared for their roles (Zhang & Chen, 2014).

In December 1989, '*Strengthening the Training for Principals of Primary and Secondary Schools Nationwide*' was published by the State Education Commission (Chen et al., 2011; SEC, 1989) which heralded the 'modern principal training system' (Xu, 2011; Zhang, 2008). This was the first systematic and complete guide to principal development in primary and secondary schools, which resulted in wide-spread and targeted principal training, aimed at improving educational quality (*jiao yu zhi liang*) (Qian & Walker, 2014; Walker & Qian, 2015; Wilson & Xue, 2013: 802), and developing principals' competencies for both management and leadership (Yan & Ehrich, 2009). This phase has been characterized as one of standardization and systematization, where the State retained the sole authority to appoint training providers for principal development programmes (Zheng et al., 2013).

In December 1999, the Ministry of Education officially issued the Training Regulations for School Principals, to outline the content and form of national training, and new responsibilities for school principals (Wilson & Xue, 2013). These Principal Standards define the responsibilities of principals and provide the fundamental basis for school principals' selection, training, evaluation, performance management and other important school management issues. These standards, as in other countries, not only outline the expected requirements and behaviors for school principals' but also specify the professional development and training expectations (Chen, 2011).

It was also mandated that vice principals (*fu xiao zhang*) must obtain a training qualification before they could serve as a school principal (MOE, 1999; Walker et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2013). In view of this, vice principals, novice principals (*xin xiao zhang*) and in-service principals (*zai zhi xiao zhang*) needed to participate in principal development training in order to acquire compulsory certification (Wilson & Xue, 2013: 802). Hence it was compulsory for pre-service principals to successfully complete their

training within a certain time frame, or risk the possibility of losing their post (Zheng et al., 2013). In 1999, when universities and research institutes were asked to collaborate with local training providers on redesigning the training programmes, it was then possible for these authorized training providers to equip principals with the knowledge that could help them improve the standards and standings of their schools (Chen, 2010; Wilson & Xue, 2013; Zheng et al., 2013). The engagement of various training providers led to the implementation of advanced training programmes appropriate for an elite and honorary group of principals, also referred in Chinese literature as the ‘backbone’ principals (*gu gan xiao zhang*) (Chen, et al. 2011; Wilson & Xue, 2013; Zheng et al., 2013).

At present, there are four national training institutions, thirty-one provincial training institutions, over two hundred municipal training institutions and more than two thousands training institutions set up to prepare principals in China (Rao, 2015; He, 2011; Zheng et al., 2013). At present, there exist three types of certificate training programmes provided for school principals: the 300-hour ‘*Qualification Training*’ professional certification for new principals; the 240-hour ‘*Improving Training*’ for principals equipped with certified qualifications and the ‘*Advanced Training Seminar*’ is a select group of outstanding principals (*gu gan xiao zhang*) who wish to enhance their skills and knowledge (MOE, 1999; Zheng et al., 2013; Rao, 2015).

Almost two decades on, principal training in China has improved greatly and thousands of school principals have participated in a wide range of training programmes and benefitted from sound professional guidance and support (Feng, 2003; Zheng et al., 2013). Yet despite such large-scale investment in principal preparation and training, some writers propose that the effectiveness of principal training is highly questionable (Chu, 2009; Ma, 2015). Furthermore, Yan & Ehrich, (2009) note that the lack of suitably qualified trainers, limited resources, and the outdated ‘chalk-and-talk’ teaching methods, continue to be in use, especially in remote and poverty-stricken areas of China, where there is a large concentration of school principals in service.

In their study, Chu and Cravens, (2012) highlighted a lack of practical applicability in principal training in China while Feng, (2003) noted that most of the training programmes were too theoretical and lacked specific practical guidance. Other writers similarly posit that many of the training programmes fail to connect adequately to the realities of schooling and the school context (Han & Dong, 2014; Wei & Jiang, 2011; Zhou, 2015). As a comparison for contemporary training programmes, Walker & Qian, (2015) advocate that school leaders in China are disconnected from actual leadership practice, as they are in the dilemma of having to concede to an upward bias, enfolded by strict policies. As a consequence, a review of the domestic literature on change leadership for Chinese principals, led to an R&D inquiry of developing a training curriculum to prepare these school leaders for capacity-building (Tang et al., 2014).

Given the paucity of independent research in this area, a small-scale qualitative study

was undertaken to offer some insights into the claims and counter-claims made about learning method in the principal training in China. It is set out to collect contemporary views based on the empirical data collected from the secondary school principals in one province about the effectiveness of their leadership preparation and training under formal and informal learning. While it is fully acknowledged that this study cannot claim to be representative of China, the findings point towards some important contradictions and tensions that principals in one part of this country currently experience.

## **Methodology and Research Background**

The small-scale qualitative study of 37 principals, outlined in this article, connects to the design and findings of a larger, cross national research project, known as the 7 System Leadership Study (7SLS). The 7SLS study is based on a comparative analysis of principal leadership development and training across seven education systems<sup>1</sup> (Malaysia, Australia, Hong Kong, England, Indonesia, Russia, and Singapore). The 7SLS study has gathered empirical evidence about school leaders' professional development, their leadership practices and their leadership preparation training. The 7-system leadership study drew upon cultural, social and demographic diversities and provided important insights into principals' preparation and their professional development among the varying education systems in the study. The 7SLS also drew upon leadership theories and aspects of school improvement that broadly frame its research design (Harris et al., 2014; Harris & Jones, 2015; Jones et al., 2015). These resulting published findings (Bysik, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2016; Jones et al., 2015; Kwan & Yuet, 2015; Ng, 2015; Perera, Adams & Muniandy, 2016; Sumintono et al., 2015) were a result of the explicit efforts by research scholars from a range of countries who undertook a collective investigation into leadership preparation and development in seven diverse education systems. The findings from 7SLS have been disseminated internationally through publications, dedicated summits and through academic conferences.

The present research study links to 7SLS insofar that these research design adapts the essence of the 7SLS which is to explore the nature and impact of principals' preparation and training in this Chinese province with the anticipation of contributing to the broader knowledge base on this subject. This study is a smaller, exploratory empirical study undertaken with a purposive sample of 37 secondary school principals from different districts in the Henan Province. Henan is the most populous province in China with 77,872,000 inhabitants; consist of 25,578 primary schools and 5,340 secondary schools (China Statistical Yearbook, 2015). The main aim of this small-scale study was to get 'under the surface' of the training and preparation experience of a cross section of principals in China. The 'surface' in this study is secondary school principal training and

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<sup>1</sup> System is used in this context not to mean entire education systems, with the aim to explore the systemic view of school leadership and their professional development across these seven systems.

development in China, together with a specific case study located in the province. A case study design was used as this matched the requirements of an interpretive inquiry (Bysik, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2016; Jones et al., 2015; Kwan & Yuet, 2015; Ng, 2015; Perera, Adams & Muniandy, 2016; Sumintono et al., 2015).

The data collection activities were conducted in early 2015 and involved gathering the views of public secondary school principals. The data collection methods used in this study comprised open ended questionnaires and semi structured interviews<sup>2</sup>. There were 37 secondary school principals who completed the questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaires were consist of several questions that capture principals' background (demographic profile), perceptions and views about their experiences and their perspectives towards the school principals' initial preparation and professional development. This data will be drawn upon in this article along with findings from the next stage of data collection. The second stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of six principals, to explore certain themes and findings in more depth from the open-ended questionnaire stage. The protocol include question that elaborate more issues such as how training prepare principals' leadership role, what they hope to gain from this programme professionally and how it impact to their leadership practice. The six respondents were randomly selected from the respondents to the questionnaire and the interviews were conducted face to face.

All interviews were recorded digitally and fully transcribed. Inductive coding was utilized based on the broad parameters of the 7SLS to reduce, simplify and transform the raw data into a more manageable form. A classification of themes was then undertaken and the verification of emerging patterns was confirmed (Bazeley, 2013). A constant comparative approach was used to interrogate and compare the two qualitative data sets. The findings that follow therefore are based on the data from both the open-ended part of the survey and the semi-structured interviews with principals.

## Findings

The demographic findings from the questionnaire will initially be outlined as contextual background, followed by a discussion of the findings that were informed by the open ended part of the questionnaire and the interview data. The demographic information concerning the secondary school principals who participated in the questionnaire can be summarized as follows (Table 1).

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<sup>2</sup> The semi-structured interview schedule was adapted from the 7SLS open-ended questionnaire, it was used to gather participants' views on their principal training and professional development in Henan province, China.



Table 1. Descriptive statistics of principals' demographics ( $n=37$ )

Demographics	Frequency	Per cent
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	25	68
<i>Female</i>	12	32
Age		
<i>30 - 39 years</i>	15	40
<i>40 - 49 years</i>	18	49
<i>Over 50 years</i>	4	11
Highest Education		
<i>Diploma</i>	9	24
<i>Undergraduate</i>	26	71
<i>Postgraduate</i>	2	5
Tenure as principal		
<i>less than 5 years</i>	10	27
<i>6 – 10 years</i>	16	43
<i>11 - 15 years</i>	7	19
<i>16 - 20 years</i>	4	11
Involvement in principal training preparation		
<i>Yes</i>	28	76
<i>No</i>	9	24

The data from the open-ended section of the questionnaire and the interview transcripts were combined and compared to identify common themes or issues. The combined data revealed that the majority of secondary school principals, who participated in the study, were actively seeking additional ways to improve and develop their leadership capability. This finding is consistent with the findings from other empirical studies, which show that Chinese principals are actively seeking additional ways to extend their leadership expertise (Wilson & Xue, 2013; Tang et al., 2014).

The data also showed that for the principals in the sample, preparation for becoming a principal essentially took two forms that can be characterized as ‘formal learning’<sup>3</sup> and ‘informal learning’.

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<sup>3</sup> The definition of ‘formal learning’ in the Chinese context refers to the pre-service and in-service trainings stipulated nationally for principals. Formal training is structured and implemented by the government, in collaboration with training institutes, with the core aim of providing the knowledge and skills required for developing principals’ leadership competency.

### **a. Informal Learning**

Informal training included the various forms of professional learning and development that the principals acquired before either before taking up their post or that they secured themselves during their tenure. As one principal explained:

*“Being a school principal is not easy; this position is not just simply a management role. The school principal’s work is very diverse and difficult; I therefore have to adequately prepare myself to meet the requirement through a wide range of training and self-development that is not provided for me” (I4<sup>4</sup>).*

The data showed that the main source of informal learning to become a principal was in fact to be actively guided and coached by another principal.

*“My principal is the main guideline for my leadership practice” (R5<sup>5</sup>).*

*“When I was a teacher I used to pay attention to the school principal’s work and schedule, I used to communicate with school principals, to try to understand the way of their thinking” (R20).*

### On-the-job Learning

The excerpts above highlight that observing the role of the principal is one way of learning about the job. Also, ten of the principals in the open-ended questionnaire sample (27%) stated that they continue to actively look to other principals as a guide:

*“By communicating with my former school principal, I can understand his ideology and approach to managing teachers and the curriculum for students” (R16).*

### Learn from others

The data suggests that this self-directed strategy provided principals with the opportunity to learn from other principals and to follow their approaches and strategies. Another dimension of learning from other principals is illustrated in the following quotations;

*“I followed excellent school principals to learn good management experiences” (R25)*

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<sup>4</sup> ‘I4’ is the pseudonym used to refer to the individual interviews, where “I” represents interview, and “4” refers to one of the participants in our list.

<sup>5</sup> ‘R5’ is the pseudonym used for the respondents that participated in an open-ended questionnaire survey, where “R” represents ‘respondent’, and “5” refers to one of the participants of this survey.

*“I designed my leadership ‘blue print’ built upon the influence on others, particularly other principals” (R2)*

In preparing and developing their leadership skills, principals in this study talked a great deal about learning from others

*“To improve the level of my personal specialized knowledge, I learn from the experiences of other successful educators, I expand my horizons and I improve my abilities as a school leader and school manager by learning from others” (R23)*

The data show that principals in this province of China have an ambition to make themselves more aware about the dynamics of the job and actively create opportunities to learn more by learning directly from others. It was notable that very few principals talked about the direct influence of formal training upon their practice as a school leader. Formal training regard to official preparation to become principal provide by the government through training institution or at university. This finding is consistent with the conclusions arising from the 7SLS which shows that from the perspective of the principal, formal training does not necessarily or automatically impact upon their practice (Harris & Jones, 2015; Jones et al., 2015).

#### Personal Values

In addition, the analysis from this small-scale study revealed that there is also something distinctly Confucian about the way these Chinese principals viewed their role. As one principal explained:

*“I take care of my looks, my words and my deeds, and treat people modestly” (R20).*

Another respondent also talked about personal values when confronting leadership challenges in the school:

*“Yes, often a calm and respectful personality will solve the problems that cannot be solved” (R26).*

Building human relationships and forging strong bonds with others was a consistent theme throughout the data (Walker & Qian, 2015) and this could be typical of a Confucian approach to leadership.

#### Reading

Another salient finding from the data was that many of the principals in the sample, relied on self-learning, mostly by reading books, to prepare for their leadership role. For these principals, reading books about educational management, pedagogy and

psychology was considered an essential and key aspect of preparation.

*“I read books about leadership and school improvement. I learned about advanced educational management concept through reading”* (R22)

*“I studied hard to learn the knowledge of pedagogy and psychology”*  
(R24)

The comments from the principals in this study reinforced that learning to be a principal, for them, was about personal self-development and they highlighted that the responsibility to learn and prepare for their role, was essentially, their own. In direct contrast, formal training was viewed by the principals in this study, as being the core responsibility of others, at a provincial level. Few principals in the study talked positively about their formal training or its impact upon them. Most principals in this sample commented positively more upon their informal learning processes rather than the formal training they received.

### **b. Formal Learning**

Formal learning was characterized by the training provided locally or as part of an established University degree. According to Li, (2008), the impact of any formal preparation programme is measured by its impact or its effect. As Wang, (2013) notes a school principal's effectiveness is a reflection upon how far their learning needs and preparation requirements have been fully met. In short, whether principal preparation and training programmes are effective or not, from a school principal's perspective, it comes down to the impact upon them.

#### Complementary sufficient

From a total of 37 principals, who completed the open-ended part of the questionnaire, 32 (78%) said that they had participated in training at a provincial training center or in a local university. Their comments about such formal training programmes, although not extensive, tended to be mainly complimentary:

*“Participation in the training programmes enabled me to expand my knowledge about leadership”* (R14).

*“The preparation programmes helped me to understand more clearly what I should prepare for the work”* (R16).

14 principals highlighted the positive side of training and highlighted said that it prepared them much better for the job. At the same time, those few principals who commented on the formal training said that it gave them the opportunity to compare and contrast their views about leadership with other principals:

*“The training was very effective. In particular, it has helped me become more competent. The training has broadened my horizons through my*

*exchanges with other peers” (I3)*

*“I valued meeting with colleagues, I know my own strengths and weaknesses and I know how to address the problems I face through my leadership practice” (Q2).*

#### Beneficial to work-life balance management

The principal training covers not only educational leadership skills but on people and stress management. The respondents highlighted that the completion of the training helped them to balance their workload more effectively:

*“Being a school principal is difficult as it involves a very heavily workload. During the preparation programme I now better understand the school principal’s work, it was a great help for my future work” (R6)*

*“In my opinion, the preparation programmes are effective. They help you to predict issues and seek solutions in advance. During the training I will now know what I should do when facing leadership uncertainties. Therefore, in my view, the preparation programmes are effective” (R20).*

*“Through the preparation programme I have a deeper understanding of leadership and I feel more fully prepared. I can improve on my leadership practice For example, I realized I should emphasize leading the curriculum more; I also now understand that I need to train teachers to have community engagement to improve my leadership ability” (R23).*

One principal reflected on the methods used in the training:

*“It was effective, especially the case study analysis of educational management, it helps me as a school principal to diagnose and solve the problems of school management” (I5).*

In summary, there were numerous positive comments about the formal training that principals received, even though the comments about the formal training were far fewer than those about the informal training. Those who did respond about the formal training noted that it helped them cope with their job as a school leader and raised awareness of the need for future planning.

#### Impragmatic syllabus

There were however some negative viewpoints about the benefits of the formal training. Two principals for example, offered alternative views:

*“It was effective, but these preparation programmes do not happen in a practice setting, therefore, during the process of concrete implementation*

*and operation are cannot be achieved” (R27)*

*“I participated in the school principal training for one month. But when I returned to work to face my annual work plan, it didn’t help much” (R7)*

Other researchers such as Feng (2003) and Wan (2013) highlight the fact that most of the preparation programmes in China are knowledge-oriented, and principals are not given any chance to undertake practical or applied learning. It has been proposed therefore that some of the training courses are disconnected from the actual practice of being a school leader.

Hallinger (2006) and Carrington et al., (2015) point out to the gap that exists between the training content and the reality that school principals are confronted with in their routine everyday work. One principal expressed this challenge as follows:

*“It was not very effective because in reality, leadership practice is restricted by the teaching environment” (R23)*

This is parallel to the comment by Zhang (2008) and Wilson and Xue, (2013) who raised the importance of contextualized training as a way of developing principals’ leadership skills and expertise. As one principal noted (R23):

*“I think I am quite weak in terms of curriculum leadership, especially as our nation is emphasizing new curriculum reform, I wish the training programme has focused upon and improved this particular set of professional skills.”*

#### Curriculum reform initiative

Various studies highlight that the majority of school principals in China are currently struggling with the curriculum reform initiative, piloted in 2001 (Walker & Qian, 2015; Yin et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2012; Yin & Lee, 2011). The new curriculum requires the school principal to be an instructional leader and to focus on the teaching and learning processes much more than their managerial responsibilities (Chu & Cravens, 2012). However, Zhao and Li (2006), and Tang et al., (2014) argue that if a school leader only focuses on administrative roles he or she will lack instructional leadership abilities which in turn, make promoting and delivering the new curriculum reform very difficult.

In terms of leadership skills, several principals highlighted a few strengths of the formal training. For example, one principal stressed about the importance of communication skills:

*“The training has made a better communicator with others, and this is an essential skill for school leaders, I think how to communicate with each other is most important, and the training helps with that skill development” (R6)*

*“What should we learn from training programme? Communication with each other and problem solving? It is no good just to study theories, it does not work” (I1).*

*“I can communicate with teachers more effectively, and can much better to handle the relationships between teachers and teachers, teachers and students” (R5).*

Another salient point about work as school leader, from the data was that of building relationships. Two principals noted:

*“Interpersonal relationship is an essential ability of a leader at home, I need to establish a good interpersonal relationship with others, and coordinate that relationship ensure that others work with me” (R19).*

*“Have good relationship means you have the ability to get things done, after all, school is a place for dealing with relationships, so these skills are critically important for a leader” (R10)*

Another strong theme that came out of the data was the importance of cultural identity:

*“Compared to western counties, our nation has not established an innovative educational concept .... I haven’t found any innovation in education, I have been to many famous schools in this nation, many famous schools. But none of them escape from the Confucian educational ideology” (I1)*

The issue of context and culture is without question becoming increasingly important as comparisons are made between and within education systems. The findings from the 7SLS, for example, are showing categorically, that cultural and contextual influences are often factored out of any explanation of differential educational performance and outcomes. Yet, as this small-scale study has shown, culture and context is an important part of shaping leadership behaviors, attitudes and practices, As Qian & Walker, (2014: 60) note: “the influence of societal and cultural factors is the least investigated” but potentially the most potent explanation for differential school leader performance.

## **Conclusion and Next Steps**

It is unquestionably the case that being a principal in a secondary school in China is currently very demanding. The evidence from this small-scale study illustrates the pressure that principals feel and also underlines that while the formal training is helpful to some principals, it still has some way to go to fully meet their day to day needs, particularly in addressing contemporary challenges, such as implementing the new curriculum. The data shows that much of the principals’ preparation and development, in the Chinese Province studied, is still delivered by university staff or regional trainers

(see for example study by Wilson & Xue, 2013; Zheng et al., 2013), who often have little real practical experience and may not fully understand the requirements or stresses associated with being a school leader (Chao, 2016). Both informal and formal learning methodologies in the training determine the effectiveness of the information delivery as both learning preferences reacts differently towards topics and area. It is wise to blend appropriately both methods to ensure the target audience can easily extract the knowledge sharing content to be implemented and incorporated in playing their role as school leaders.

In China, also in many other countries, there is a policy drive towards principals being more actively involved in leading innovation and change. Even though principal training has become mainstream since 1990, the data from this small-scale study, is questioning how far school leadership preparation really meets the contemporary needs of principals in Henan Province. The 7SLS evidence to date shows that, many principals, like those in this study, are seeking alternative forms of support and guidance and not relying on the formal training alone to meet their leadership needs (Harris & Jones, 2015). The findings from this study and the much larger 7SLS point to a major disconnect between the current demands placed on principals, to be more innovative, instructional and transformational leaders, and the nature of the preparation and training provided which tends to be instrumental and administrative (Harris & Jones, 2015). The emerging evidence highlights real tensions between what is currently required of principals in China and what they have been trained to do.

Such tensions appear to be particularly acute in cultures where traditionally, the role of the principal has been managerial and largely concerned with control and administration, rather than development or leadership. Findings from the 7SLS study are showing that the role tensions that principals experience tend to be commonplace, across very diverse contexts, as more accountability demands are placed upon principals along with new and extensive leadership expectations. Evidence from this study is showing that there is a huge weight placed on principals to deliver more and more, plus there is a fault line between how the principal's role is currently *defined* and what school leaders actually *have* to do. While policies may stipulate that principals should be 'instructional or transformational leaders', the stark reality is that, in certain heavily centralized systems such as Henan province, China, the majority of their daily tasks remain fundamentally and routinely managerial and administrative.

This study identifies factors contributing to the local context of principal trainings, preparation and their professional development in Henan province. The findings showed that it is important to understand the community's culture, needs and their local value system that is inextricably intertwined with the political ideologies of the Chinese Central Government. External demands from the State Government, who hold the authoritative chain of command, rules over school principals, despite their leadership formal positions. However, some key features about principal leadership trainings seem to emerge from the data which can benefit training institution, whereby they can



redesign the training curriculum to make it more relevant to the professional development of school principals.

Given the benefits of principal trainings, culture alone cannot fully account for the actions, behavior or approaches of school leaders. Context remains an important explanatory variable in school and system performance. Therefore without question, more cross-national studies are needed for two main reasons. Firstly, to address the paucity of contemporary, international evidence about leadership practices in many Asian countries, including China. Even smaller scale studies, such as that reported in this article, not only contribute to the knowledge base but also will also ensure that school leadership preparation and training is understood in more culturally and contextually appropriate ways. Secondly and most importantly, to place a cultural and contextual lens over any comparative analysis in order to a gain a better understanding of the way leadership practice is defined, understood and enacted. Studies have never ceased to provide a preliminary review of a benefit-providing training scheme and structure. Reviewing some evidence study from Asia and Western countries will certainly help in tailor-making a localized training system that fit the local cultural context and participant-friendly.

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